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AN OLD MEXICAN BANDEJA

On June 25, 1856, President Comonfort, of Mexico, promulgated a law forbidding religious and civil corporations to own or administer real estate other than churches and schools and the churches and religious orders were allowed three months to dispose of their holdings. The clergy, however, sought to evade the law by buying in the property through third parties, and many complications arose.

On July 12, 1859, following the triumph of the Liberal Party in Mexico, the long-discussed measure was finally decided by Juarez, who nationalized clergy property by an edict published at Vera Cruz. By this drastic decree, all property held by convents and religious orders was confiscated by the government and ordered to be sold. Although this law was not put into operation until December 27, 1860, and then did not specifically include the nunneries, these, with the exceptions of the Sisters of Charity, shared in the common fate from February, 1861, to February, 1863, and by March, 1863, the nationalization of clergy property was an accomplished fact.

This is not the place, nor is there any occasion for a discussion of the event in its political, financial, or ethical aspects, and it is only referred to here in order to make perfectly clear the facts concerning the placing upon the market and the acquisition of the remarkable piece of post-Columbian native art here described.

The despoiled orders found themselves suddenly confronting abject want. From having been the hoarders of wealth, par excellence, toward whose treasury the resources of the country had been slowly but surely drifting for two or more centuries, at one fell stroke they found themselves face to face with beggary. Any collector of antiquities possessed of a moderate amount of cash, if in Mexico at that time, could have purchased the most valuable gems and other relics of a former splendor for a mere song. For there were few purchasers. The people were impoverished, and many regarded the transaction as sacrilegious. Moreover there was at first no confidence with regard to the validity of the purchases. The Monte Pios held frequent sales of such treasures as never before had been seen, and they were sold for next to nothing. This condition of things lasted for some time, until the French army

entered the City of Mexico (1863). Then its officers, with keen appreciation of such things, swept over the country with avidity, and by securing and carrying off many of these valuable objects, advanced prices considerably.

It was about this time that an American woman, Mrs. Edward Yorke, then in the City of Mexico, who was known to take an intelligent interest in antiquities, was informed that a superb "Aztec Bandeja," or tray, was offered for sale along with other relics of early Spanish times by the Sisters of the Convent of the Encarnacion. It was held by the Sisters to be an Aztec relic,



OLD MEXICAN BANDEJA
Painted and Gilded Wood
Showing Spanish Influence

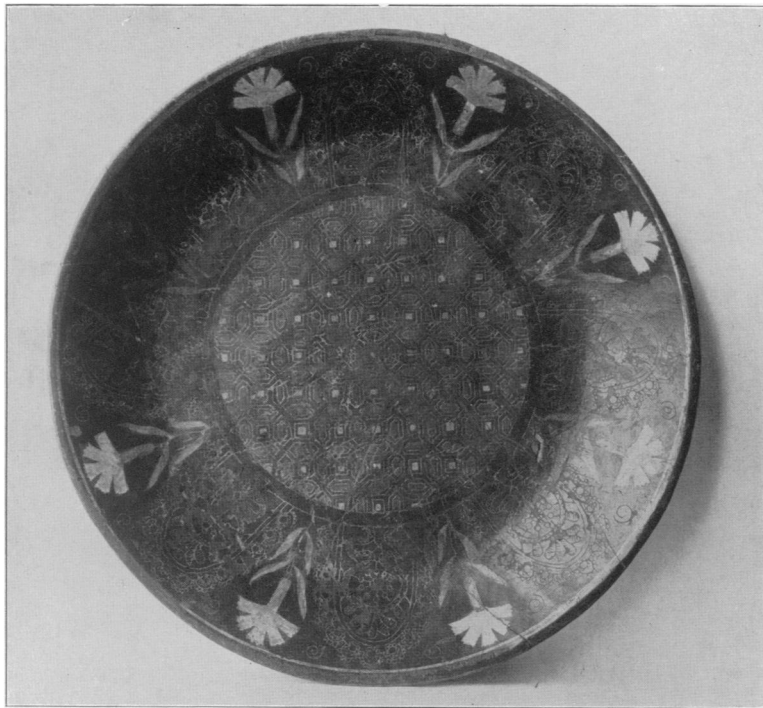
but while this claim was technically correct, and undoubtedly the piece was entirely the work of ancient native artisans, the central motive and technique at once proclaim it to have been made after the Conquest and under Spanish influence. This central motive is in crude representation of a double-headed eagle. The form of the bird was probably adapted by the native Mexican artist from the Austrian double-headed eagle, then the emblem of the Kings of Spain. The Austrian dynasty of Spain reigned over that country and its Colonies from 1517, when Charles V. ascended the throne. Through his mother, Joanna, he had inherited his rights to the crown of Spain, and through his father, Philip of Austria—son of Emperor Maximilian and Mary, daughter of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy—he controlled the Netherlands. He was proclaimed Emperor of Germany in 1519. The Austrian dynasty continued to hold sway over Spain and its Colonies until 1700. As Senor Ventosa, of Puebla, has very properly pointed out, during this period, which includes the reigns of Charles I., Philip II., Philip III., Philip IV., and Charles II. of Spain, all the viceroys of New Spain (Mexico) took special care that the double-headed Austrian eagle should appear on every work undertaken—not only out of compliment to the monarch, but in order to assert the Spanish claims to supremacy over the natives. So much was the emblem in fashion at that time that it appears on Chinese ceramics imported into Mexico between 1600-1700 by the Spaniards of Acapulco. The forms vary and follow the taste or fashion of different periods. When Maximilian in the last century reigned over the country, he adopted the Mexican single-headed eagle, having, of course, renounced all his own rights. According to the above mentioned authority, ancient objects decorated with the double-headed eagle date prior to 1700.

The superb piece which occupies us, therefore, probably may be assigned to a period preceding or approaching that date. The *Bandeja* measures three feet in diameter and is hollowed to a depth of four inches, out of one section of a cypress tree, known to the ancient Mexicans as the "ahuehuetl." It is a tree of the kind now represented by the great tree of Popotla and by the moss-covered giants of the grove which still encircles the spring at the foot of the porphyritic hill of Chapultepec. This was once a royal Aztec residence, where the ashes of Montezuma's predecessors were deposited. The gigantic moss-draped cypresses, many of which were cut down at the time of the American invasion, still form one of the most impressive survivals of early days in the Valley of Mexico.

The tray, of which an illustration is given, was evidently rudely chipped out with a gouge. It is varnished over with a crude lacquer of copal and is decorated with zones of conventional red-shaded flowers and foliage of a greenish-brown hue and with white animals and red or golden birds, among these the Quetzal, scattered amid an admirably fine, elaborate and profuse gold decoration. In the centre of a mass of the same decoration of flowers and birds is the double-headed bird, a crown being set between the two heads.

The only colors used on the tray are shaded-red, white, and greenish-brown. The rim is decorated with dents-de-loup in the same colors. Prescott, quoting the old Spanish chroniclers, Bernal Diaz, Hernandez, and others, who

enumerated the Mexican industries as found existing at the time of the Conquest, mentions that the Mexicans "made cups and vases of a lacquered or painted wood, impervious to wet, and gaudily decorated. Their dyes were obtained from both mineral and vegetable substances. Among them was the rich Cochineal, the modern rival of the Tyrian purple," etc., etc. Pipes were also made of "a varnished and richly gilt wood." "Elaborately gilt and var-



OLD SPANISH TRAY
Lacquered and Painted Wood
Showing Moorish Influence

nished jars," as well as "carved vessels," are also enumerated among the tribute paid by different cities—and likewise "stools made of a single block of wood." Copal, which furnishes the lacquer or varnish, was an important article of trade, and was of refined white quality, as well as of the unrefined coarse kind.

I am indebted to Mrs. Nuttall for the information that in Michoacan, where wooden vessels are manufactured, a curious technique is used which goes back to pre-Columbian times. The larvæ of an insect—a coccus—are

gathered, put in a large vessel and boiling water is poured over them. A waxy exudation rises to the top which when cold resembles yellow wax. This is rolled into small cylinders over an inch in diameter and tied up in zapote leaves. When used they are melted and mixed with color and applied with the hand as a varnishing wax. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the surface was decorated by painting in oils and gilding. This technique, however, is quite different from that employed in the Valley of Mexico—at least it differs from that illustrated in the piece which is occupying our attention at present.

The manner in which the Bandeja entered into the possession of the Sisters of the Convent of the Encarnacion is vouched for under the signature of the Superior (Prelada) Maria Castillo, countersigned by Josefa Martinez, who appears to have possessed some inherited claim upon the family to whom it once belonged, and of whom she appears as the accredited representative, in the year 1830. At least she joined with the Mother Superior in signing the paper, vouching for the statement handed over to the purchaser at the time of the purchase, which was as follows:

“The family of Nesahualcoyotl (the ruling family of Texcoco at the time of the Conquest) gave to the Convent of the Encarnacion various Aztec curiosities having belonged to its forefathers, among which was a bandeja of wood, which gift was made to the Superior (Prelada) for the use of the Church because Mother Señora Maria de la Luz, a nun now deceased, was niece of the above-named family. Her heir in 1830 was Josefa Martinez, who belongs to the same family. She has no claim on anything that is sold in this Convent.

I, the Superior (Prelada) sign

Sra Maria Castillo

As responsible and owner (dueña)

Josefa Martinez.”

The Convent of Nuestra Señora de la Encarnacion, usually known as La Encarnacion, was founded on March 21, 1593, by the order of Conceptionistas. Its early beginnings were small, however, and it was not until March 7, 1648, that the church was dedicated. At the end of the eighteenth century the present cloister was built, and therein were deposited for safe keeping after the suppression of the monastic orders the works of art removed from other convents. At the time of the confiscation of clergy property under President Juarez, La Encarnacion was reported as possessing over \$1,000,000. Of recent times the building has been assigned to public uses.

As an object the piece is absolutely unique. The writer has been told that there is a smaller one in the Museo Nacional of Mexico, but has not seen it.

A small wooden reliquary or casket, veneered over alternately with plates of rudely engraved bone and plates of glass, through which appears a barbaric tinsely decoration of red and white flowers, was purchased from the nuns

Note. The explanatory words on the first line in parentheses are not in the text of the document.

at the same time and was said to belong to the same group of objects mentioned above, as received from the descendants of Nesahualcoyotl. Above the lock on the lid is the head of a Mexican lion in silver. The silver lock is in the form of the same type of double-headed crowned bird as is represented on the bandeja. A careful study of all the facts must lead one to assign the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century as the probable date of the object.

A smaller tray, or platter, of painted and varnished, or crudely lacquered, wood, but possibly of Spanish manufacture, has been recently acquired by the Museum. While it widely differs in art and technique from the above described Mexican bandeja, it may be grouped in the same general class. This specimen measures twenty inches in diameter and is hollowed to a depth of two and a half inches. A thick coating of paint and varnish is spread over the wood, and on this an incised decoration is executed. In the centre the decoration is of brown and black Moorish design, representing the well-known decoration on wooden furniture inlaid with ivory (or pearl) so common in the bazaars of the East. Around this is a border of incised lace, probably representing the famous Point de Genes, so fashionable in the seventeenth century, and at that time a widespread article of trade. At least the style and pattern represented on the tray bear a close resemblance to the lace reproduced in Mrs. Palliser's *History of Lace* (p. 248) as trimming a broad collar which is said to have belonged to Gustavus Adolphus, and is in her collection. This would tend to place this object also toward the middle of the seventeenth century, when the lace was so much in vogue. Around the rim of the platter are stiff carnations alternately painted cream and orange-red. The reverse of the tray is yellow. While the interior of this tray does not show traces of gouging, as does the Mexican platter, the under side is rougher and betrays the tool. The design, however, is incised instead of being simply laid on, and it possesses none of that barbaric splendor so characteristic of the Mexican bandeja. On the other hand, its decorative motives reveal the characteristics of Spanish industrial art, which so often exhibits a blending of European and Moorish traditions and models.

S. Y. S.



WHEEL-LOCK GUNS AND PISTOLS

Two wheel-lock arquebuses and a pair of pistols lately acquired by the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art are excellent examples of early portable fire arms. They probably date about the commencement of the seventeenth century, and are apparently of German origin.

Like most ancient weapons the exact origin of the arquebus* (or harquebus as it is sometimes spelt) still remains in doubt, but it probably made its appearance during the latter half of the fifteenth century, as we know that the Swiss employed it at the battle of Morat in 1476. In England, a little later, a portion of the Yeomen of the Guard, just then established, were armed with it. The French, however, appear to have been late in adopting it, for it does not seem

* Arquebus from the Italian *arca-bouza*, corrupted from *bocca*, which signified a bow with a mouth, or as Sir Sibbald Scott thinks from the Dutch *bus*, the barrel of a gun.